Revising for Higher Order Concerns

Inquire: “What Was I Writing Again?”

Overview
It is not uncommon to get to a point when writing a paper where you ask yourself, “what was I writing about again?” Sometimes a paper will morph into something different from what it started out as, something that may in fact be more interesting than what your original idea was. Or you may decide that your original focus isn’t working for the paper you want to write. Whenever this happens, remember, don’t panic! You can always revise your idea.

Big Question: How do I fix my main idea after I’ve started writing?

Watch: Changing Your Destination on the Road

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Revision is not proofreading, nor is it just rewriting. Instead, think of revising your idea as changing your destination when you’ve already left the house. You’re already on the road, but you’ve decided that you want to go someplace else instead of where you originally planned. In writing terms, you’ll still be using the work you’ve done so far, but your goal in using it will be different.

Depending on how far along you are in the process of writing your paper, revising the idea behind all you’ve written so far can seem like a daunting prospect. While it is true that the amount of work you’ll be doing in revision will generally be proportional to how much you’ve written so far, it also won’t be as difficult as it seems. Remember, revising your idea does not mean rewriting your whole paper. The work you’ve already put time into is still valuable, and will help you in your revision process.

Whatever it is about your idea that isn’t working, looking back through your own writing as well as your sources or inspirations will help you understand what the problem is and how to fix it. In that sense, the key to revision really is reenvisioning what your idea initially was, taking it apart, and putting it back together in a better way.

Think about a time your idea didn’t turn out the way you thought it would. How did you uncover the source of the problem? Were you able to use your previous work to help you fix it?
Read: Adjusting Your Goal

Overview: Discovering the Problem

Revising your idea can become necessary at any point during the process of writing your paper. You may find while trying to figure out your thesis statement that your idea, as originally conceived, doesn’t work as well as you thought. Or you may discover that your thesis is actually disproved by the evidence you’ve selected to support it. Or it may be that your original idea is too broad or narrow to build into an effective discussion of sufficient length. The problem can even be as simple as figuring out that you don’t agree with your original idea anymore. Whatever the scenario, revising your idea is always a possibility that may allow you to continue on with your paper without having to start from scratch. Revising your idea is just one aspect of revising for high order concerns, which are concerns that impact the overall meaning of your paper: the idea, structure, organization, and support. These are important to evaluate before you evaluate low order concerns like spelling, grammar, and mechanics.

Reevaluate Your Idea

As you write your paper, make sure you are reevaluating your idea at every stage. This doesn’t mean you should be constantly revising what you are writing about, but rather keeping an eye out for any divergences from your original idea that the path of your writing may take. If you find yourself writing more about a topic that is only tangentially related to your idea, the best solution may be revising your idea into a form that would support, or be composed of, this new tangent. However, it may also be that this tangent will be more difficult to develop into a fully formed paper than your original idea, and, while not impossible, it may be more trouble than it’s worth. Whether you decide to revise your idea is entirely up to you, but this decision should be made with care, as whatever changes you make will have to be accounted for in the rest of your paper.

Ask the Right Questions

Once you know that you want to revise your idea, your first step will be to decide what you want to change in your idea and why, as knowing something isn’t working will only alert you to the fact that you have a problem to solve. Think about what you want your paper to do. Who are you writing it for? What subject are you trying to address, and why do you care about it? What are the key topics that relate to this discussion? If these questions seem familiar, you probably asked them yourself when you were originally developing your idea while brainstorming. Coming back to these questions will reorient your mind back to what your original intentions were, and should help you see what about your idea isn’t working toward those goals.

Look at What You Have

Keeping these goals in mind, look at what you have written so far. Assuming you have a good amount of writing to judge, what do you think is working toward your goals, and what is working against these goals? Remember that the main purpose of revision is not to rewrite the whole of what you’ve worked on so far, but rather to give yourself the chance to readjust your work so that it all lines up with your intentions. Looking back on your present work will help you realize what idea or ideas you’ve been writing toward the whole time, and might contain clues as to how you should revise your main idea.
Rewriting the Concept

When you revise an idea, the language of expressing that idea is not your priority, that language is considered a low order concern. Rather, think about how you are going to execute that idea throughout your paper. This means knowing how each section will relate back to your main idea or your thesis is most important, just as it was when you first started your paper. Again, your goal here is not to rewrite your whole paper, although there may be some extent of rewriting involved. Once you’ve analyzed what isn’t working about your idea, found what you need to change, and modified your concept, the work of revision becomes writing your thesis statement and the rest of your paper, drawing from this new idea. The amount of new material will largely depend on what topics or evidence you need to use to support your new concept, and how much of this you feel you can draw from what you’ve already completed. However, don’t worry about trying to force it to match the work you’ve done. After you’ve written this new material, you’ll be able to make the adjustments necessary to incorporate the existing parts of your paper that will still work in your new concept.

Reflect: The Time for Revisions

Poll

Everyone’s thought process is different, and consequently, some people like to wait longer than others to see whether an idea is working. While it may be easier to correct your course earlier on in your writing process, it may be that you need to see a larger picture before you can make the determination that something just isn’t working.

In your past writing, when have you been most comfortable making the decision to revise your idea?
- In the early, brainstorming stages, so I can start with a solid plan.
- Further along in the middle, when I can see if my writing is doing what I want it to.
- After I’m mostly done, so that I can look at the full picture and determine exactly what needs changing.

Expand: Reading Your Own Material

Overview: Writer’s Mindset vs. Reader’s Mindset

Revision involves switching your examination of your own material from a writer’s mindset to a reader’s mindset. What this means is learning to look at your own writing from the perspective of your intended audience in order to find the difficulties that a reader may encounter when trying to understand your discussion of a particular topic. While this can be difficult, especially if your topic is controversial or targeted to a specific audience, there are some ways this technique can help in your understanding of your own material.

Listen to Your Internal Critic

The main difference in mindset between writing and reading your writing is that, whereas it is generally good practice to let yourself write without internal critique while working on your first draft, here you want to allow that voice of self-criticism to speak. This doesn’t mean dragging yourself through the mud, as most writers are their own worst critics. Instead, take notes on what comes to mind as you read your material, both positive and negative. Again, try to think about your writing as if you are reading it for the first time, just as your audience will be. Ask yourself if you would understand your thesis if you hadn’t
already done the research necessary to grasp all the concepts involved in what you are saying. Think of ways that your idea might be misinterpreted or misapplied. Then, look over your thoughts and decide, as the writer, which ideas are worth considering, and make your changes accordingly.

Choosing What to Change

Sometimes revising an idea can cause larger problems to arise in your paper that you didn't foresee. It's important to consider which changes are necessary for the improvement of your paper, and which changes would be more trouble than they are worth. While you should always set out to write the strongest paper you are capable of, this doesn't mean that you need to have considered every possible problem or question that a reader might come up with from your discussion. Rather, in your revision, you need to keep in mind which changes will be the most beneficial to your discussion without having to rewrite the whole paper.

By this point, you should have some amount of workable material that can be used to help you decide what is working and what is not. Again, reading your material as a reader is what will help you to understand the distinction. Which parts seem to have the most logical and well-reasoned points? Do these parts work together toward a larger point? If so, is this larger point the same as or similar to your thesis? These are the major questions you should ask when considering what changes to make. If you find yourself considering a change that doesn’t consider the main topic of your paper, you may want to leave that part as it is and work around it.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Revising Drafts

- An article with advice for revision, no matter where you are in the writing process
- http://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/revising-drafts/
- Source: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center

Steps for Revising Your Paper

- A summary of different aspects of revision
- https://owlenglish.purdue.edu/owl/resource/561/05/
- Source: Online Writing Lab, Purdue University

Rewriting

- An overview of revision strategies and how they are useful
- Source: University of Maryland University College Writing Guide

Lesson Glossary

**revision**: the process of reviewing and changing a piece of writing with the goal of improvement  
**thesis**: the main idea of your paper  
**high order concerns**: concerns in revision that focus on structure, content, organization, and ideas; these should be the primary focus in revision  
**low order concerns**: concerns in editing that focus on spelling, grammar, and mechanics; these should be a secondary focus in editing
Check Your Knowledge

1. As you write your paper, you should always make sure to...
   A. revise constantly.
   B. correct your grammar and punctuation before you move on.
   C. have a backup idea in mind in case the first one doesn't work.
   D. reevaluate your idea at each stage.

2. Once you know that you want to revise your idea, your first step will be to...
   A. identify that you have a problem.
   B. decide what you want to change in your idea and why.
   C. delete your work so far.
   D. seek out a separate opinion from your peer.

3. When you revise your idea, your priority should be thinking about how you want to execute the idea throughout your paper.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
1. D  2. B  3. A

Citations

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